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Shard 1

Iron Grey

Caught out in the storm, Rain ran for home, fleeing the barrage of droplets hammering rings in the dirty puddles. Her normal route down Smith Alley had become a quagmire.

'Blast all weather-sayers,' she muttered, hovering on the edge of the muddy walkway, wondering if she could make it across. If she did, it would be at the expense of her new stockings and leather boots. She should have taken no notice of the local weather-woman who had promised a fine day.

Thunder crackled, urging caution. Deciding to wait out the worst under an overhanging roof, Rain retreated to huddle against the wall, sheltering her basket from the downpour. Shivering a little in the chill breeze, she pulled her shawl around her head and closed her eyes, listening to the raindrops hitting the roof above.

A cart rumbled past, the owner huddled under an improvised cloak of canvas, his grizzled face staring determinedly out from under the peak of his hood.

‘Want a lift, little mistress?’ the old man called.

‘No, thank you,’ Rain answered, giving him a smile. ‘I’ll wait it out here in the dry.’

‘Suit yourself. Spearthrower weather this,’ he grumbled as he clicked the horse into movement again.

‘Yes, it’s cruel enough.’

‘Good day to you.’

‘Good day.’

The cart jolted away, dousing the walls of the alley with dirty water, the backwash slopping on Rain’s skirt, wetting the navy-blue swallows she had embroidered on the hem. She grimaced, cursing herself softly for not jumping out of the way in time. The wagon turned the corner and she was alone again. From the look of the skies, it seemed likely she might be trapped here for a while yet. Rain seized the chance to dream, letting her thoughts trickle back to the past like the water running away down the gutter.

According to her father, she had begun life in such a storm. Born on the first day of March in the third year of the reign of King Ramil and Queen Taoshira, she emerged into the grey morning of the world. As the midwife cut the cord, the heavens opened, rain pouring from the eaves over the bedroom window like a waterfall. The flowering vine that clambered up the brickwork and peeked into the room stirred and twitched under the onslaught, orange trumpet petals bobbing a fanfare. Flushed red with outrage, the newborn mewed and protested as she took her first unwilling breath, fists waving blindly. Her mother,

roused by the cry, lifted her head from the pillow and reached out to take the child.

'Little Rain,' Sunbeam murmured, snuggling the baby to her breast, choosing a name suiting the moment of birth, as was the custom in the families belonging to the glassmakers' guild.

Torrent took his wife's hand in his scarred fist, smoothing his fingers over her palm. He caressed her with the same light touch he used for his finished masterpieces as they cooled after exposure to the furnace. Torrent and Sunbeam had waited so long for their family and he could hardly believe it had finally happened.

'She's a miracle, Sunbeam,' he said hoarsely. 'Perfect. And she'll be the first of many, you'll see. She'll have brothers and sisters to play with. She'll never be alone.'

But he was wrong. There were to be no more children. Before the year was out, fever swept the land and Sunbeam Glassmaker was among those who died, leaving Torrent with a baby to tend and a business to manage.

'You must marry again, for the child's sake,' his neighbours advised the silent man as he toiled over his workbench, rolling, spinning, and blowing the molten gather, twisting it with pincers into anguished shapes.

Rain's father merely shook his head and returned to creating droplet-shaped bubbles, the only tears he allowed himself to shed. As he finished each one, he suspended it over his daughter's cradle. He carried on until

the ceiling in her bedroom was covered with them. When the setting sun shone obliquely through the window, the teardrops caught the light, scattering rainbows across her room. Finally, his grieving at the furnace done, he sat beside Rain's cot and admired the effect.

'I'll fetch you the moon and stars, Rain,' he crooned to the baby. 'But for now, here's your mother's sunbeams. You and I must carry on.'

As she had grown, the teardrop bedroom had stayed with Rain, a sanctuary in her busy home. It had become the place where she dreamed and made her plans. Now she had reached fifteen, and her father had risen to the head of his craft, his workshop on the outskirts of Tigral a place of pilgrimage for those who wished to collect the finest glassware. There was rarely a quiet moment. Young men fought to become his apprentices; he could have filled his house three times over with pupils had the guild rules allowed. Rain thought the five who lodged there at the moment were more than enough, their voices loud in the kitchen, boots clattering on the stairs at all hours.

And feeding them required many trips to and fro from the market, even when the weather was like this. Rain wriggled her toes in her damp boots, amused by her ability to blame the apprentices for everything.

The clouds were beginning to break up, the intensity of the storm fading. Despite the damp, cold conditions, Rain felt strangely content, set apart by the weather which was keeping others indoors. She so rarely got

any peace at home. Orders for her father's products had flooded in ever since Torrent developed an expertise in the making of stained-glass windows; all acknowledged him as the leading exponent of the art. To walk into a room lit by a Torrent window was to step inside a miracle, they said, and Rain agreed. Little wonder that the Queen herself had chosen him to make the stained glass for the temple being built in the palace complex.

Rain shaded her eyes to look over the rooftops of Tigral to the throne room at the summit of the hill, the new temple just beyond. The tempest had tarnished the gold pavilions and stripped the fruit trees of their leaves—yet another gloomy day after weeks of rain. It had truly been a dismal harvest and without the wise government of Prime Minister Melletin the land would have been facing a winter of starvation. As it was, though the city would avoid real suffering, everyone would be expected to tighten their belts and obey the rationing laws. Commissions such as the Queen's were hard to come by in these difficult days. Hopefully, the job should see the forge through the bad times until conditions improved. Rain knew they would do better than many others and was grateful for the Queen's generosity, as the monarch funded public works out of her private purse.

Slowly, the rain eased off and weak sunshine filtered through the iron-grey clouds. Seizing her chance, Rain edged her way down the alley, jumping from doorstep to doorstep to avoid the worst of the

filthy water. Raising her woollen skirt and cotton petticoat above her shins out of the wet earned her a whistle from Mil Blackfire, one of the smith's boys.

'Want to come and dry off by our fire, Mistress Rain?' he called. 'I've a nice spot for you just here.' He patted his knee as he lounged against the anvil.

'Save it for Cora!' Rain replied, rolling her eyes at his antics. Mil was courting her friend—and half the girls in the district if rumours were to be believed. 'She won't be pleased to hear you've been inviting me in.'

Mil gave her a cocky smile. 'We could keep it just between us two. Come on, Rain, you're half drowned.'

Rain leapt to the next step with a flounce. 'Give over, Mil. Not now, not ever. Anyway, I don't believe in having that kind of secret from my friend.'

As his attempts at flirtation were pure habit rather than seriously meant, Mil gave up with a good-humoured laugh. Soon the regular chink of hammer on metal broadcast that he'd returned to his work.

But the exchange reminded Rain that she did have one secret—one that risked her whole world if it came out.

'Rain, my love! Are you soaked?' Her father had been anxiously waiting for her return. He strode out of the workshop, a big man with capable hands and a curly thatch of grey-streaked hair, face craggy with lines. Whisking the basket from her grip, he smoothly

steered her to the furnace. Work paused as the apprentices stopped to watch the pair.

Her father tutted. ‘Look at you: you’re like a cat that’s taken a tumble down the well.’ He brushed her straggling locks off her forehead and kissed her brow. He smiled into her blue eyes. He often told her that he counted himself fortunate to be able to look into a patch of summer sky each time he saw them.

Used to his fussing over her, Rain submitted to him peeling off her wet shawl to hang in a warm spot so it could return from muddy pink to its normal rose colour.

‘I took shelter for a while,’ she told him, dragging her fingers through her wet hair in the absence of a comb. She twisted it up out of the way and fastened it in place with a pearl-headed pin. ‘Smith Alley has turned into a swamp.’

‘Aye, the blacksmiths’ guild said they were going to see to the drainage but they never do what they promise. Sit down, sit down. Nettle, fetch Mistress Rain some tea.’

The youngest apprentice, a lean youth, all bony knees and elbows, hurried off to the kitchen.

‘I’m not that wet.’

‘Love, you’re dripping on the floor.’

She scuffed at the puddle she was making with the toe of her grimy boot, making her swallow hem dance. ‘But I got the beef. Last bit to be had in Tigral.’

‘I’m sure we’ll all be grateful for that come suppertime, but for now I just want to get my girl dry.’

Nettle came back with a steaming cup. 'Here you are, Mistress Rain: you get that down you and you'll feel better.'

She smiled up at the young man, who was only a year or two older than her and the sweetest of the current crop of apprentices. 'Thank you, Master Nettle.'

He blushed and stammered something incomprehensible as he backed away.

Torrent nudged his daughter. 'Stop it,' he whispered.

'What?'

'Smiling at him. The poor boy's in love with you—half of them are, you know. He's quite handy until you come along and then he's all fingers and thumbs. I can't do anything with them when you're in the workshop. I'm thinking of banning you from being in here, least when the fires are lit.'

Rain laughed. But was it true? She glanced round at the apprentices, trying not to make it too obvious that she was studying them. They had returned to their tasks but every so often they would sneak a look at their master and his daughter. A number of tools clattered to the floor as a plague of clumsiness swept over them.

'They don't fancy me—they just fancy the idea of marrying the master's only child,' she hissed back, well aware of the realities of life in a guild craft.

Torrent didn't laugh as she expected. Indeed, her comment made him a little glum—a strange mood for her usually cheerful father. Something must have happened to upset him. He knelt at her feet to ease off her

boots, his tough leather apron reluctantly folding in the middle.

'That might be so, love, but it doesn't stop you being the prettiest glassmaker's daughter in Tigral.'

She prodded him in the stomach with her foot. 'I'm almost the only glassmaker's daughter, Papa, in case you've forgotten. You wouldn't count Master Blizzard's Ember because she's only three.'

'I'd forgotten that little mite. Well then, you're the second prettiest—'

He didn't finish because Rain had jabbed him harder as punishment for his teasing.

'Where's your respect for an old man?' he gasped, threatening to tickle the sole of her foot.

'Show me an old man, and I'll respect him,' she replied smartly. 'You're still in your prime, Papa.'

He shook his head sadly, releasing her foot and standing up. 'Not so, love.' He tousled her damp hair. 'When you've finished your tea, I've left something in your room for you to see.'

He didn't say any more—didn't need to.

She took a sip and nodded. 'All right, Papa. I'll go up immediately.'

The glass teardrops tinkled gently in the breeze through the open window. Rain rubbed her hair dry and quickly changed into a gown, a fine woollen weave the colour of a red sunset. She laced it up at the sides as she took a seat at the desk to unroll the

scroll her father had left there. This was their secret. While her father, the master glassblower, provided the skill to colour the glass to the exact shade required and solder them in their lead frame, it was his daughter who had the vision to create the designs that had proved so successful. It was fortunate that the guild had never got wind of this fact. As a bastion of old-fashioned ideas, withstanding as many of the reforms introduced by King Ramil as they could, the guild-masters did not allow women to practise the art of glassmaking. Despite his recognized gifts, her father would be thrown out of the guild, forbidden to work in Tigral, if anyone outside the family discovered their secret. But to work together was important to both of them; they made a perfect team, the creativity of one prompting the other to new heights of achievement, something the guild failed even to consider possible.

Yet, thought Rain, taking note of the suggested alterations to her original design, she had allowed herself a little rebellious gesture against the guild rules. Inspired by Queen Taoshira's custom of taking a creature to represent an individual's personality, Rain included her own sign, that of the swallow, in every window. A raindrop would have been too clear a statement, so she had chosen the bird that returned each year to Tigral around her birthday as her signature. If you looked carefully, the forked tail and curved wings wove their way into each Torrent creation, either as the bird itself, or more commonly, in the

repeated shapes in foliage and sky. The guild-masters were praising her work without knowing it.

The parchment crackled as she weighted it flat with some smooth stones. In this design for the temple, the swallow sailed above the child-goddess's head, her playmate in a spring field. Happily, the Queen had found no fault with it, but had requested a dragonfly to be added, hovering over the pool at the child's feet. Rain picked up her charcoal and began to sketch the new element, already seeing the colours in her mind, turquoise blue and black, a fine web for the wings in specially blown glass that would trap the bubbles to represent the mesh.

An hour later, her father knocked discreetly on her door.

'May I come in?'

'Of course.' Rain sat back from her work, pleased with herself. 'What do you think?' Absent-mindedly, she toyed with her necklace of silver-glass teardrops her father had crafted for her.

Torrent bent over, his hand resting on the curls that scattered down his daughter's back. Now dry, her hair had returned to its mahogany colour, a deep reddish brown that shone like polished wood.

'Magnificent.'

'Yes, I'm pleased with it. Can you make the glass for the dragonfly wings as I've suggested?'

He scratched his chin. 'With a little experimentation.'

'You'll enjoy the challenge.'

‘You know me well, love.’ He let his hand linger on her shoulder. ‘You’re my world, you know that, Raindrop, don’t you?’

Alerted by his sombre tone, Rain turned her head to look up at him. He was staring out of the window, the setting sun bronzing his face with golden light.

‘What’s the matter, Papa? You’ve been acting strangely ever since I came home.’

‘I’ve asked your cousins to come to supper tonight.’

Rain wrinkled her nose. ‘Shadow and Timber? I can see why you’re feeling gloomy.’ Neither of them relished the company of the two young relatives, both aggressive businessmen making a name for themselves in the guild as glass traders. Torrent had only used their services because they were family. All they talked about was the price of raw materials, the strength of the market in Kandar and Gerfal, or the evil of import duties; they had no creative soul or appreciation of the beauty of the goods they handled. If you made a joke in Shadow’s presence, it was five minutes before he got the punchline and his laughter was creaky and dutiful. Timber was quicker-witted, but he only laughed when someone else was the target of the jest.

‘Now I’m fifty, the guild has said I have to name my successor in my workshop,’ Torrent added.

Rain put together the apparently unconnected remarks.

‘You’ve chosen?’ she asked in a small voice. Part of her had known that their life could not continue on its

quiet path, but she hadn't realized that change would arrive so suddenly.

'It has to be family or you would not be safe,' he said, in a plea for her to understand.

'I see.'

'Shadow and Timber may leave a lot to be desired as people but they will protect you. I'll make it a condition of my will that you can carry on working if they move in.'

Rain rolled up the design and carefully secured it with twine before handing it to her father.

'That's good.'

'If I die before you're settled, they'll make sure you're looked after, see you well married.'

'I'm not marrying, Papa.'

He gave her a fond smile. 'Of course not yet—you're barely fifteen. But life is fragile—your mother taught me that. I would be a fool not to think of your future.'

'I wish you could leave the forge to me, Papa, then none of this would be necessary. You wouldn't have to worry.'

'I know, but I can't. Rules are rules.'

'The rules should be changed.'

'Maybe they will, but there's no sign yet of the guild-masters coming to their senses any time soon. I've made discreet attempts to influence them in our favour but I'm afraid of saying too much. If they think I'm arguing for women to be allowed to work because of you, they might poke their noses into our affairs and spoil what we have.'

Rain already knew this but it was hard to accept such an injustice just because she'd been born the wrong sex.

'You should have pretended I was a boy, Papa.'

He chuckled and pulled her up into a hug. 'It might have worked while you were a child but no one would believe the little waif I've raised was a fifteen-year-old boy. I'm afraid to shatter your illusions, Raindrop, but I fear you are never going to be what one would call a tall woman.'

'Oh, be quiet, you big bear.' Her lack of height was something which annoyed Rain and amused Torrent.

'Well now, that's no way to treat your father. Remember to show our guests your best manners so they fall in with our plans.'

'I'll try. But you must admit, they have a way of putting your teeth on edge.'

'Cousin Rain, this stew is very wholesome,' complimented Shadow Glasstrader. 'I see that even without a mother's influence you have not failed to attain all the womanly skills needed in a household.'

Biting her lip, Rain gave him a tight smile, hoping for her father's sake he mistook her irritated silence for maidenly shyness.

Shadow leaned back in his chair and folded his thin hands across his rounded belly. In his late twenties, he was already settling to a paunch, which looked odd on his lanky frame. His reddish-brown hair was

combed smoothly back from his forehead, framing his pale oval face. He surveyed the room of apprentices with a superior expression. Rain could tell he was preparing himself to deliver another of his little words of wisdom to what he believed were grateful listeners.

'Uncle Torrent, I'm not sure it is quite fitting that my cousin should live without female companionship in a household of men,' he said in a carrying voice, his choice of subject as unwelcome as it was unexpected.

The gentle conversation in the room fell away. The apprentices turned their eyes on their master, sitting at the head of the table with his fork arrested halfway to his mouth. Rain stared at her plate, the gravy smearing the white surface the exact colour of her cousin's hair.

'Come now, Shadow,' intervened his brother, Timber, slopping some more beer into his glass, 'you think too much of what is proper and what's not. You just said Rain was skilled in all womanly crafts; I'm sure the same can be said for all her female virtues. You are getting as narrow as those priests of the old war god, Hollin, always moaning about one thing or another, concentrating on the ceremony rather than the substance.'

Timber winked at Rain. Blessed with better looks than his brother, he appeared to think his wavy brown hair and stylish moustache made him irresistible. To Rain, who cared little for the current fashion, the hair on his upper lip looked like a dead mouse.

‘My daughter is above reproach,’ growled Torrent. ‘I will not have anyone imply otherwise.’

‘Of course, uncle,’ Shadow backtracked quickly. He and his brother knew they stood to gain much from an association with their uncle’s forge; Rain suspected they had agreed to humour the old man as long as was necessary. ‘And as I said, my cousin is a very talented cook, even in these days of scarcity.’

Torrent gave a grunt of assent, letting the matter drop, but the damage had been done. Rain now felt conscious of her position in the household as never before and she disliked Shadow even more than usual for stealing her peace of mind. She was just deciding whether she should retire from the table to avoid further criticism, when Timber broached a new topic.

‘The word on the exchange, uncle, is that the king is entertaining ambassadors from one of the newly discovered lands to the east, some place called Magharna.’ Timber twitched the flared tails of his bronze silk jacket into precise folds on his lap like a lady fussing with her skirts. Shadow was wearing an almost identical one of a bilious shade of green. Another unfortunate fashion the brothers had chosen to follow, thought Rain.

‘Never heard of it,’ said Torrent, wiping his plate clean with a crust, shirt-sleeves rolled up to his elbows, his only concession to dinner being that he no longer wore his apron.

‘I’m not surprised.’ Timber turned to Rain like a tutor addressing a pupil in need of instruction. ‘You

are too young to remember, cousin, but under the old emperor, Fergox Spearthrower, there was not much interest in exploration, only in military conquest. The present King has greatly expanded our knowledge of distant lands, funding numerous voyages of discovery.'

'Best thing King Ramil has done, good for business,' interjected Shadow, speaking through a mouthful. 'He should concentrate on this kind of thing and less on reforms in my view.'

Just as well your view doesn't count for much, thought Rain, who was a firm supporter of the present King and Queen.

'So what are these Magharnans like?' asked Torrent, moving the subject away from a critique of their ruler.

'I've heard that, as a race, they are quite tall, black hair thick and dead straight, skin a burnished colour, like field workers. They dress strangely, elaborate robes over tunics, fine layers of slashed cloth so that they look like walking cobwebs.'

Must be a pain to wash, mused Rain, thinking of the great pile of clothes from her household waiting for the tub in the back kitchen.

'Do they have a king?' Torrent enquired, pushing his plate away.

'They have someone they call the Master at the head of a ruling family. As I understand it, they think of him more like a deity.'

As a follower of the god Hollin, Shadow sniffed his disapproval at such sacrilege.

‘But there’s more, Uncle Torrent. They are looking for craftsmen to come to their country to work on a summer palace for the Master.’ Timber gave a smug smile. ‘I put a word or two into the right ears, of course, and luckily the Magharnans had already seen one of your windows in the temple—the one of the Goddess as healer. They were enquiring about you; I would not be surprised if they ask you to send someone from your forge to Magharna to design something similar for them.’

Torrent looked at his daughter. ‘They want a designer?’

‘Yes. They say they have craftsmen skilled in glass-making, but no designers to match you and no tradition of stained-glass manufacturing.’ Timber glanced round the room. ‘Surely one or two of your apprentices have learnt something of your skill, enough to satisfy these Magharnans? Just imagine the honour for our guild: the first craft to establish a trade with this country! I know the King is very eager to see us succeed.’

Torrent stood up abruptly and clapped his hands, addressing the apprentices. ‘Boys, clear the table and then retire for the night.’

Timber frowned. ‘Are you not going to say any more than that? This is great news for us—for your forge.’

Torrent pushed the door open with a bang and strode out, calling over his shoulder. ‘Shadow, Timber, come to my study. You too, Rain. There’s something we have to discuss.’

* * *

'You did what? You've been letting her dabble in design for years!' Timber paced the room, tugging at the roots of his hair with one frantic fist. 'Do you know what you've done? You've risked everything—your business, your wealth, your own family!'

Torrent stood with his back to the shuttered window, calmly lighting the candlestick on his desk. Rain sat on a stool near the draughtsman bench. Rolls of her sketches were stacked in the pigeonholes behind it, stretching almost to the ceiling—years of her labour. Shadow slumped in an armchair near the fire, his mouth slack with shock.

Her father blew out the taper. 'I don't think you understand, Timber: she does more than dabble. Rain *is* Torrent stained glass. Every single one of them is her vision; I'm merely the one who has the privilege of realizing it for her.'

'I don't believe you.' Timber spun on his heel and loomed over Rain. 'Cousin, what is this foolishness? Tell me my uncle has lost his senses. It must be a joke.'

Rain did not meet his eyes but ran a finger over the ribbon tying the scroll containing her first design, a wheatsheaf for a local baker.

'I'm not joking,' said Torrent.

'By Hollin, I wish you were!' Timber slammed a hand down on the bench by Rain's arm. 'It must stop immediately, you hear. You can't risk the family like this. You'll ruin us as glass traders if this comes out!'

Anyone would think I'd committed murder, not created something beautiful and unique, thought Rain, focusing on the black hairs that flourished on her cousin's forearm like a little forest.

'Rain is not going to stop,' Torrent replied calmly. 'She is a brilliant artist. It would be a crime to prevent her using her talent.'

'It's a crime to let her continue.'

'No, it merely breaks a rule—a rule that should've been challenged long ago.'

Timber paled. 'You're not thinking of bringing this out into the open, surely?'

Torrent shifted uncomfortably. 'Perhaps if I were a more courageous man, I would, but I cannot do that to Rain. More likely than not, we'd be thrown out of the guild with no means of earning a living. I would prefer it if we were simply left in peace to continue working as we have. No one has been harmed.'

'I don't believe you!' Timber was off again, ranting as he strode. 'You say no one has been harmed but you fail to recognize that you've endangered our entire family by your flagrant disregard of guild rules. And why? Because you wish to spoil your daughter. You've let her have her way in this household for too long.'

Shadow chose this moment to add his weight on his brother's side of the argument. 'Indeed, uncle, I fear you've done our cousin a great disservice, taken her from the station into which she was born and tried to make her into the son you never had.'

Torrent's anger grew now the attacks had turned on

Rain, his hands shaking as he tried to hold on to his temper. 'I do not need a son; I have Rain.'

'Rain is a girl, destined for marriage and family—that's if any decent man will have her now,' said Shadow piously.

'It would be an honour for any suitor to marry my daughter.'

'Not if you've been cast out of the guild and are reduced to begging in the streets because of her,' interjected Timber.

'It won't come to that.'

'It might. What if one of the apprentices informs the guild-masters?'

'They don't know it is her work; we're very careful.'

'But you are taking a senseless risk!'

'There is nothing senseless about it. Look at the accounts, Timber. The stained glass is the most profitable part of my business; without her we would be just a mediocre forge.'

Rain doubted that very much, but it warmed her to hear her father's defence.

'What are you going to do now, uncle?' asked Timber sarcastically. 'The Magharnan interest in your designer is likely to place you under intense scrutiny. It will be a miracle if the truth does not come out.'

'Why should it? Unless one of you takes it upon yourself to reveal our secret, we can carry on as before. I had hoped by confiding in you like this, by naming you both as my successors, you will protect Rain as you would the rest of my business.'

His declaration deflated the cousins' indignation like a pin in a pig's bladder balloon.

'You've named us as your successors?' repeated Timber.

Torrent gave a jerky nod. 'I intend to, if you agree to let Rain continue working.'

The two men exchanged a look.

'You are thinking of retiring?' asked Timber.

'No, not just yet, but I will take you on as junior partners until I do so if that is your wish. When I'm gone, the forge will be left to you both equally, with the exception of a generous provision to be made for Rain's dowry, if she has not already married by then.'

'Perhaps one of us should marry her,' mused Shadow, 'keep the money in the family.'

Rain snapped the charcoal pencil she had been toying with.

'That will not be necessary,' replied Torrent curtly. 'I wish her to marry for love, not as a business arrangement.'

Timber stroked his moustache. 'Of course. How very enlightened of you, uncle.' He gave Rain an overly warm grin. 'Hers would be a heart worth winning.'

He's changed his tune quickly, thought Rain. *One moment calling me a disgrace, the next a prize. I'm not so easily fooled.*

'Then I can rely on you both to keep our secret?' pushed Torrent, wanting their promise before the interview ended.

'Certainly,' agreed Shadow.

‘Indeed. But what’s to be done about the contract with the Magharnans?’ enquired Timber, frowning. ‘No one will believe that you say you wish to turn it down. Questions will be asked.’

Torrent put an arm around his daughter’s shoulders, aware that she had not said anything during the whole discussion, which was unlike her.

‘We’ll worry about that when we have to. I’ve not been asked yet.’

‘You will be.’

‘Then we will find a way round the problem as we always do. Right, my love?’

Rain nodded, resting her head against her father’s side. ‘Yes, Papa.’